



State of Connecticut COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

450 Columbus Boulevard, Suite 2, Hartford, CT 06103

Promoting Equality and Justice for all People

Labor and Public Employees Committee Public Hearing – March 8, 2022

CHRO Testimony Regarding SB 318 – AAC Captive Audience Meetings HB 5355 – AAC Sexual Violence Posting in the Workplace

Representative Porter, Senator Kushner, Representative Sanchez, Senator Cabrera and members of the Labor and Public Employees Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding SB 318, An Act Concerning Captive Audience Meetings, and HB 5355, An Act Concerning Sexual Violence Posting in the Workplace.

SB 318 – An Act Concerning Captive Audience Meetings

The CHRO supports SB 318, An Act Concerning Captive Audience Meetings. This bill would prohibit “captive audience meetings”, in which employees are required to attend and hear about the employer’s opinion on matters of religion.

Connecticut antidiscrimination law protects employees from discrimination on the basis of religion, and from retaliation for opposing religious discrimination. The goal of such protections is to eliminate religious discrimination in the workplace, ensuring that employees in Connecticut can be free to hold their own religious beliefs without fear of losing a job or promotion because of those beliefs, or as a result of reporting any religious discrimination they may face.

Being compelled to attend a meeting at which an employer espouses its opinion on religious matters is a particular kind of discrimination. It sends a signal to employees who don’t share the same views that they may need to hide their own beliefs or other aspects of their identity, at the risk of suffering the ire of their employer. They may feel that they are no longer welcome in the workplace, that they may be targeted for their beliefs or other aspects of their identity, or that it is not worth requesting a religious accommodation for fear of reprisal. No employee should have to feel such discomfort or hostility every time they walk into work, just because it has been made clear to them that the company has a different religious view, or one which may be hostile to their identity.

HB 5355 – AAC Sexual Violence Posting in the Workplace

As the state agency charged with enforcing Connecticut’s antidiscrimination statutes and with advocating for equal opportunity for all of Connecticut’s residents, the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities strongly supports HB 5355. The bill will require state agencies to provide required training and education related to domestic violence and the resources available to domestic violence victims and require that all employers post notices with this information in a prominent place accessible to employees along with other required notices such as those outlining protections against sexual harassment. This bill requires that the CHRO develop this training in conjunction with the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence and provide it to agencies for free online.

Domestic violence is on the rise. The National Commission on Domestic Violence has found that 37.7% of Connecticut women and 33.9% of Connecticut men experience intimate partner domestic violence during their lifetimes.¹ This rate has gone up over the course of the COVID-19 crisis. This shadow pandemic has disproportionately affected women, children, and members of the LGBTQ+ community who are overwhelmingly – though not solely – the victims of domestic violence. Particular attention must be paid to Black and American Indian women who report far higher rates of domestic violence abuse than any other group.

Many victims must show up to work during the day and then return to their abuser at night. Those lucky enough to escape frequently suffer long-lasting physical and mental health issues. Approximately 20% of survivors report the onset of major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse disorders.² These are traumas that can last a lifetime.

Escape alone is often not enough, however. Survivors face harsh economic realities that can leave them without a home, without income, without even food to eat. Insurance companies may refuse to recognize that a survivor needs a policy of their own when it is under the name of their abuser. Employers may be hesitant to hire someone with a history of domestic violence survivorship for fear that person is “unstable”, to protect the standing and reputation of the abuser or out of fear that the violence may follow the employee to the workplace. Access to the protections of the legal system may be unobtainable by those without the funds to hire a lawyer just to get a restraining order.

By raising awareness of this issue, we can work to eliminate the stigma around discussing domestic violence and get victims the help they need. This bill goes a long way towards that goal. The CHRO therefore fully supports HB 5355 as a means of ensuring the most vulnerable in our society have the support they need. Thank you for your consideration of this important bill.

¹ https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2497/ncadv_connecticut_fact_sheet_2020.pdf